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A Toe in the Water and a Bet both ways: a Rationale for Teaching Convergence Journalism

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Introduction

The development of higher education journalism courses in Australia has been relatively recent, when compared to the United States. There, editor and journalist Joseph Pulitzer initially offered Columbia University money to start the world's first journalism school in 1892, although the offer was initially turned down and it didn't finally happen until 1912, a year after his death. (Dickson, 2000, pp. 3-4) A flurry of journalism schools were then developed in the US in the early 20th century, while Australia had fewer formal courses. As Sheridan Burns (2003) notes: "half the current 22 vocational courses in Australia began in the late 1960s and early 1970s, with a third commencing in the 1990s" (Sheridan Burns, 2003, p. 64).

Even once such courses at universities were established there was — and remains — rigorous debate over what should be taught in the courses, and how, and whether it is possible to 'teach' journalism at all. Lloyd, cited in Sheridan Burns (2003), for example, said the making of many journalists was "natural talent seizing fortuitous opportunity". Sheridan Burns also describes the widespread belief:

"… that journalists were born not made and that the task of the newspaper was to find this talent and develop it. Formal education was a secondary requirement and there was no satisfactory means of teaching the art. Journalists proved their professional status by their work, and in turn their work educated them. If they were ambitious for higher rank, some further education was necessary, usually by part-time study where it could be fitted in." (Sheridan Burns, 2003, p. 63)

Present thinking is more accepting of the idea that university education is helpful in preparing students for work in the field — and certainly, a growing percentage of new journalism employees are graduates, albeit not merely from journalism majors (Alysen, 1999; Hill & Tanner, 2006; O'Donnell, 1999, 2001-02; Patching, 1996; Quinn, 2001-02). But this

has not diminished the debate over *what* should be taught: specific skill sets; technical knowledge; a focus on news values and news literacy; a broader overview of history, politics and law; or something else entirely.

This paper seeks to consider this crucial debate in relation to one element of journalism education — the move towards training journalists to work across media platforms, known widely as convergence journalism. It gives a brief overview of what convergence journalism is, how it is being taught elsewhere, and shares the rationale for an experimental convergence journalism unit being taught at Edith Cowan University.

What is Convergence and Why do we Care?

In its most basic form, the term convergence simply means coming together — but the implications for media are much more complex. It can mean, for example, a physical convergence of media: a newspaper newsroom that partners with a television station, for example, or a newspaper that now has an arm that publishes online. It may mean convergence of skills within an individual: a specialist reporter who can write for print, record for broadcast and put up information online; or a multi-media, multitasking generalist, sometimes called a backpack journalist or one-man-band (Kolodzy, 2006; Outing, 2009) and, in less flattering terms, an 'Inspector Gadget' or platypus journalist (Quinn, 2005). Jenkins (2006) extends convergence to all these things, and says he means:

"the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries and the migratory behaviour of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want, Convergence is a word that manages to describe technological, industrial, cultural and social changes depending on who's speaking and what they think they are talking about." (Jenkins, 2006, pp. 3-4)

The key element is that convergence breaks down the traditional journalism 'silos' of broadcasting and print. In simple converged circumstances, journalists from different media might merely work together — either regularly or on specific projects. In a growing number of newsrooms, however, the journalists may be required to move smoothly between these media. As Birge 2004 puts it, newsrooms still need specialists — "reporters who write, photographers who take pictures and television reporters who do stand-ups … (but) they also need reporters who can think like graphic artists, television reporters who can write a brief and photographers who can shoot video and interview people at a breaking news story" (Birge, 2004).

For a number of authors, including Quinn (2005) and Kolodzy (2006), convergence is also a state of mind. It requires a shift in mindset from considering journalism from the perspective of producer to that of the consumer. Storytelling is still primary, but each story is approached by asking what medium would be best, taking into account logistics such as time and space, and audience. As Koldzy puts it,

"Convergence refocuses journalism to its core mission — to inform the public about its world in the best way possible. But nowadays the best way is not just one way: newspaper or television or the Internet. The best way is a multiple media way, doing journalism for a public that sometimes gets news form newspapers, at other times gets news from television and radio, and still other times seeks news online … Convergence requires journalists to put the reading, viewing, and browsing public at the centre of their work." (Kolodzy, 2006, p. 4)

While these diverse perspectives fail to provide a single, neat definition of convergence, together they encapsulate the core issues: convergence means bringing together media that might once have competed, and broadening the reach of journalists — either in a group or as individuals — in a bid to capture a wider, if more elusive, audience.

Given the diversity of definitions of convergence, it is not particularly easy to determine the extent to which newsrooms have converged across the industry. That said, the

best part of a decade ago, Quinn (2001-02) described a conference attended by “almost 500 senior newspaper managers from more than 40 countries” who “enthusiastically endorsed the idea that the news business was rapidly adopting a converged approach” (Quinn, 2001-02). Since then, the evolution of what are alternately called digital newsrooms ("Multimedia journalism: a classroom tour," 2002; Outing, 2009) or converged newsrooms (Bugeja, 2005; Hammon et al., 2000; Huang et al., 2003; Jarvis, 2007) has been reported widely in trade publications and literature. This observable change has led to considerable shifts in journalism education — particularly in the US where discussion on this topic has raged — to try to accommodate and, in some cases, pre-empt, what industry will require from graduates in this new news space.

How is Convergence being Taught Elsewhere?

In the United States, a clear majority of journalism schools have reacted to the change in newsrooms by altering journalism and broadcasting courses in some way to accommodate what they believe might be expected of graduates. Casteneda, Murphy and Hether (2005) reported that 60 per cent of US journalism schools were at that time preparing students to work across multiple media platforms. These authors defined the different curricula as converged, non-converged and mixed. A converged curriculum

> “ … dismantles sequences such as news-editorial, magazines and broadcast news and replaces the teaching of medium-specific courses with multi-platform courses,” while a non-converged program “may offer multimedia courses such as web journalism but they train students in a specific medium and de-emphasise multi-platform training. In between these two extremes are (mixed) programs that offer both training in a specific media and multiplatform training.” (Castaneda et al., 2005, p. 59)

As an example of these changes, Indiana University abandoned its four tracks of journalism in the late 1990s, with courses redesigned to incorporate multimedia. The focus shifted to critical thinking and four fundamental skills: writing, reporting, editing and design. Ball State University introduced a convergence curriculum in which students learned writing for print, broadcast and online, using collaborative teaching by journalism and broadcast lecturers. ("Multimedia journalism: a classroom tour," 2002)

The changes have not been without criticism or failure. Birge (2006) worried that the trend towards convergence was expensively misplaced, producing students with multi-platform abilities but no specialty. As an example, she describes the University of Southern California Annenberg School of Journalism as having adopted a converged curriculum but abandoning it a year later “when its faculty realised a little convergence can sometimes accomplish more than a lot of convergence, especially when it comes at the expense of basic skills, student preparation and program flexibility” (Birge, 2006). Another objection has been the time and resources required. Lowrey, Daniels and Becker (2005), in their investigation of factors predictive of a college introducing convergence, argued a high student-to-faculty ratio was a factor *against* introduction, "suggesting that faculty must have sufficient time to design, advocate and implement changes," (Lowrey et al., 2005, p. 44).

If there has been a chief criticism, it is that by changing curricula, journalism academics have either outpaced change in newsrooms, made changes insufficiently supported by evidence of need or overestimated demand (Birge, 2006; Criado & Kraeplin, 2003; Dennis, Meyer, Sundar, & Pryor et al, 2003; Lowrey et al., 2005; Shepard, 2007). As Shepard (2007) put it, despite the belief by educators that there would be industry demand for journalism graduates with cross-platform skills, "the job market hasn't yet shifted as much as rhetoric would suggest" (Shepard, 2007).

So what are the Reasons for and Against Teaching Convergence?

The primary reason for teaching in this area is that it is reflective of what the industry is doing — even if there is difficulty among industry members in either adopting the term or articulating the skills required (Birge, 2004; Kolodzy, 2006). The benefits of teaching convergence as part of the university journalism curriculum are similar to those for all other aspects of the program: there is a need not only for technical and skill-based education (how to record audio, for example, or how to edit video) but also a contextual learning best offered in a higher education setting. There is also a need to expand the ability of students to learn how to tell stories across media platforms — something they don't get in traditionally separated broadcast and journalism streams unless taking a double major. As Jarvis, 2007, reports after discussion with a prominent editor in the UK, "he wants (new journalists) to have at the ready the complete toolset of media and thus the ability to choose the best means to tell any story" (Jarvis, 2007). A university offers the ideal training ground for such technical skills to be learned without the pressure of a newsroom, while at the same providing the broader education that will help the future journalist approach this multi-media storytelling with greater understanding and context. As Aumente (2007) puts it, they can learn the "necessary journalistic imperatives" so journalists putting together news packages in a new form are not doing so adrift of traditional values.

The reasons against introducing a convergence unit are the same as with any new addition to a course: fear of being driven by fad rather than industry demand or a sound theoretical basis (Aumente, 2007); the expense of making substantial alterations to curricula, particularly if they require physical changes to infrastructure or increased multimedia resources, (Birge, 2006; Mencher, 2002); the need not to displace other critical elements from the curricula (Birge, 2006) and competing demand for teaching resources (Lillie & Auman, 2008; Lowrey et al., 2005). These are legitimate issues — and ones taken into account when devising an experimental unit at ECU. By considering these and other factors, we have attempted to introduce a unit that offers the best things convergence journalism education can provide, while avoiding the pitfalls experienced by educators elsewhere.

What are we doing at ECU?

We have long had a broadcasting major and a journalism major, but this semester has been the first time we have offered convergence unit as an option to students in both streams. Cognisant of the potential problems, we have taken a very slow and conservative approach. Put simply (and wilfully mixing metaphors) we are putting a toe in the waters of convergence journalism and having a bet both ways: adding it to the available options for students, but offering it within an existing unit to minimise cost and course-structure change.

It is easiest to consider our changes in light of the possible problems discussed above. Firstly, we did not want to be driven simply by the desire for something new, but have worked closely with industry to ascertain the types of multimedia work being required by journalists within their organisations. We are now also tracking graduates to get a better picture of their work tasks on employment as well as examining our assessments in other non-converged units to see if they already offer adequate training. Next, we have limited the changes to curricula by including the students in a pre-existing independent study unit, open to all communications students on supervisor approval. Rather than searching for a convergence specialist to teach the unit, it is run by a journalism lecturer; however negotiation with the broadcasting streams means expert teachers in audio, visual and other media are available when students need them. The use of an independent study unit as a vehicle has also resolved problem three: the need not to displace important elements from the curriculum. The unit is available to supplement a

journalism or broadcasting major, but does not replace a core unit. Lastly, by operating with a small group only — just five enrolled students — and choosing those with experience already in both broadcasting and journalism, we have avoided the problem of straining teaching resources.

The operation of the unit is simple. Students have bi-weekly group meetings with the option of weekly consultation periods if they want them to encourage them along the way. They choose a 'story' to tell, based on its suitability for multiple formats. The role of the tutor is to assist and advise. One of the topics under consideration involves look at the jazz scene in Perth — with the student planning audio interviews, photographs, a Google map showing venues and other elements. Another is looking at safety issues in motor racing, taking footage and recording sound at a racetrack. Within the traditional broadcasting or journalism units these would have been told using one element — audio or vision or print; convergence allows students to pull apart a topic and discover which medium is best.

As the unit fits within the independent study framework, we are bound by the assessment structure of that unit. We have three assessment points, therefore. Firstly, students produced a story plan, augmented by exploring what convergence work had been produced by major newspapers as a way of educating them both in what is possible and the difficulties working across platforms can pose. The second assessment, held mid-semester, was a presentation based on the prototype of their multimedia piece. Finally, 70 per cent of their grade is based on the final presentation at the end of semester, with students encouraged to use peer feedback from their prototype presentation to shape, develop and polish the final product. This paper was prepared necessarily mid-semester but it appears students are progressing well and have certainly shown an enthusiasm for telling journalistic stories using multiple platforms.

The work that has been produced by students so far has been fascinating. As the assessment is so broad, they have been forced to develop their own thinking and stories have grown and changed as new interviews have offered tangents they might not have considered, or ideas have proved too difficult to follow up. As an example, one student who has tracked the training regime of WAFL teams has managed to collect an incredible amount of information, from lists describing their daily diet to interviews revealing the 'no sex before games' rule to photographs of footballers waist-deep in wheelie bins full of ice. Her chief difficulty has been not in finding information worth telling, but selecting from that information the most important and interesting material and finding a way of packaging such disparate elements so that a reader can appreciate the full story. This differs greatly from the way journalism students often approach assessments: as a single question that requires a single (or limited) answer. Instead, she has answers and must now develop a clear question that will allow the information to be understood easily by the reader.

From a journalistic perspective it is a bit like watching a sausage being made: unwieldy, a little messy, and with inevitable discarding of bits and pieces along the way. From a teaching perspective, however, such intensive student learning is a joy to see: they have demonstrated skills not only in reporting and news gathering but a rapid understanding of the complexities of storytelling across multiple platforms in a limited time.

Conclusion

Defining success for the teaching of journalism convergence at ECU is difficult. We may look at it from the perspective of student satisfaction — do they feel they have learned from the experience? We could consider the perspectives of employers — do they feel the student can operate easily across platforms? We could also consider the success or otherwise based on our experience as teachers — did this unit 'gel'? Did the students respond to the methods of

teaching used? Did they demonstrate learning in the specified outcomes? We will be considering all three perspectives on the usefulness of the unit in making our decisions on whether it becomes a regular part of the curricula for journalism and broadcasting students or an experiment that didn't quite work.

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